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### **published in**

International Review of the Administrative Sciences  
1997

### **DOI (link to publisher)**

[10.1177/002085239706300201](https://doi.org/10.1177/002085239706300201)

### **document version**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

### **citation for published version (APA)**

de Vries, M. S. (1997). The Management of Public Participation in the Policy Process, with special reference to the Netherlands. *International Review of the Administrative Sciences*, 63(2), 147-164.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/002085239706300201>

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*International Review of Administrative Sciences* 1997 63: 147

DOI: 10.1177/002085239706300201

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# The management of public participation in the policy process with special reference to The Netherlands

*Michiel S. de Vries*

## Introduction

When the time comes to characterize the 1990s, it will not take the form of a wide concern about civic participation. In The Netherlands, public participation in public policy-making processes rapidly declined between 1970 and the mid-1990s. As recently as the mid-1980s American scholars had spoken of 'Hollanditis', referring to the massive antinuclear armament demonstrations in The Netherlands. This supposed disease actually marked the zenith of a participation movement which — at its peak — included 25 percent of the Dutch population. With the benefit of hindsight, we can also see that it marked the end of mass participation in The Netherlands. Not only has Hollanditis disappeared but today we see a population which — though still interested, and sometimes very interested, in politics and policy-making — has become rather passive. Moreover, regulations enabling public participation, and obliging policy-makers to keep their plans on hold until the public is given the opportunity to have their say about it, are disappearing.

In this article I will address the question of how interest-group influence on the policy-making process has changed in The Netherlands over the last 10 years. This influence reached a peak in The Netherlands during the 1970s and early 1980s, and it radically diminished thereafter; in the 1990s, all instruments for structuring the participation of interest groups have been opened to discussion. The only acceptable influence now seems to be business influence. While in the 1970s all interest groups exerted considerable influence and all stakeholders were taken seriously, measures are now being taken to restructure governmental policy-making. *Decisiveness* seems to be the main concern, and public participation is seen as a factor which delays and can even detain this decisiveness. The

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*International Review of Administrative Sciences* ISSN 0020-8523 Copyright © 1997 IIAS. SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi), Vol. 63 (1997), 147-164.

questions arising from this observation concern the consequences and the causes of this change. This article addresses the following three questions:

— Are indicators of the appreciation of participation in The Netherlands showing a decline?

— How can diminished participation in the policy process be explained theoretically?

— Which points of view dominate the current debate in The Netherlands on the way in which public participation in the policy process should be managed?

In the first section I will look at some indicators of the declining appreciation of participation. I will show that political parties address the subject less frequently now than they did in the 1970s, and that the Dutch population is also less in favour of participation. Nevertheless, the situation cannot be described as exceptional. When the opinions of Dutch political and administrative élites are compared with those in other countries, the indicators show that The Netherlands of the early 1990s still provides ample opportunity for participation. Nor has there been any decline in more traditional methods of participation (voting, reading about politics and talking about it). Substantial changes are visible, however.

How can these changes be explained? Is it just a question of changing priorities or are fundamental changes taking place? In this article I will argue that cultural dynamics are especially important. Besides technological and economic evolution, cultural developments appear to be crucial. Cultural dynamics work in four ways. They influence, first, the general public, that is the potential participants; second, public administrators, primarily responsible for preparing, formulating and implementing policies; and third, politicians, who are primarily responsible for adopting policies and whose views have changed. Finally, it will also be shown that the role of the media has changed.

The third question addresses the management of public participation. I describe how the channels through which the public participates in The Netherlands have either been restricted or have disappeared completely. This is effected either explicitly, by changing laws and regulations on public participation, or more implicitly, by presenting policy processes as being more technocratic, technical, and seemingly less political.

Another aspect of participation is whether it is seen as a procedure, as a formality, or as an interaction between policy-makers and the public. The trend in The Netherlands is towards handling participation more as a procedure and less as an interaction. One can distinguish between the individual, instrumental dimension of participation, directed at influencing policy-making in accordance with one's own interests, and the collective dimension of participation, which is directed at creating a common responsibility, support and legitimacy for the organization of activities or a policy and which is not primarily directed at achieving personal or group objectives. The first dimension, especially, would seem to be in abatement, while the second dimension of participation is becoming more important.

A third dimension concerns the point of time of participation within the policy-

making process. I will argue that this is moving towards the beginning of the policy-making process: from participation concentrated at the end of the policy-making process (perhaps even after the decision-makers have made their favoured option known), towards participation at the beginning of this process (perhaps even before the alternative policy options have been determined). We see a growing concern for so-called 'co-production'. Co-production means that government does not steer in a classic, top-down manner, but rather as an agent who tries to communicate with the target groups and adjusts its plans to their preferences. One speaks of 'win-win' situations in which a government attempts to achieve only those objectives where governmental interests coincide with those of the target groups. The underlying idea here is that it is more efficient and effective to avoid conflicts and to limit objectives to those which are in the interest of the target groups.

The method employed in this article is one of secondary research on existing databases holding data on the views of politicians, civil servants and the public concerning participation. A content analysis was conducted on several policy articles at the national, regional and local level.

### **Indicators of diminishing appreciation of participation**

Is participation in the policy process judged differently now than it was judged 20 years ago? This section tries to answer that question. I will show that today, public participation can no longer be deemed a real issue. Political party manifestos no longer refer to it and, according to the Dutch public, a trend in which the possibilities of participating in public policy are reduced is to be preferred above one in which these possibilities are enhanced. Public servants and local politicians increasingly associate participation with risk, delay and inefficiency, whereas in the 1970s the associations were with checks and balances, democratization and the quality of the policy-making process.

The first data to be used here are derived from the European Manifesto Research Project (Volkens and Hearl, 1990; Volkens, 1992). These data reflect the relative amount of attention given by political party manifestos to certain problems.

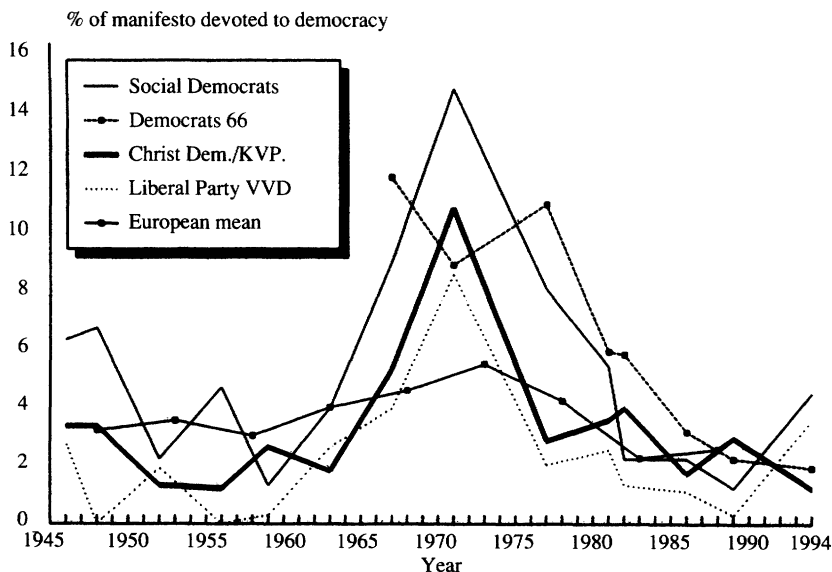
Concern for democracy is defined as 'favourable mentions of democracy as a method or goal in national and other organizations; involvement of all citizens in decision-making, as well as generalized support for the manifesto country's democracy' (Volkens, 1992: 57). Figure 1 shows the increase of concern for democracy in the late 1960s and 1970s and a decreasing concern in the 1980s. It shows that democracy became a more important issue all over Europe, and that the attention for it given by Dutch political parties was even more extreme. It is shown that in the 1970s all parties devoted more than 10 percent of their manifestos, and the social democratic parties more than 15 percent of their manifestos, to the issue of democratization. It also shows that this attention dropped to less than 5 percent in the 1990s. In other words, at the political level, democratization is today considered to be a relatively unimportant problem for which no new

arrangements have to be made. The issue of efficiency overtook the issue of democratization in the 1980s and in the 1990s it seems that the issue of governmental authority has become dominant (de Vries, 1996b).

Of course, whether or not participation is a political issue need not have any practical consequences. Might it not be possible that at the practical level, there is still ample room for public participation? The judicial arrangements made in the 1970s to institutionalize participation in the policy process might still be operating satisfactorily and without dispute. I will show, however, that this is not the case. In the 1970s one spoke of participation as a means of information, counselling, probing, influence and political consciousness (Clijsen, 1972; Nelissen, 1980: 136); the enhancement of open democracy and of flawed parliamentary representation (Jollies, 1974: 268); a valuable contact between civilians and policy-makers. Nowadays the emphasis lies on somewhat denigratory associations. As the report of the Scientific Board on Governmental Policy has it:

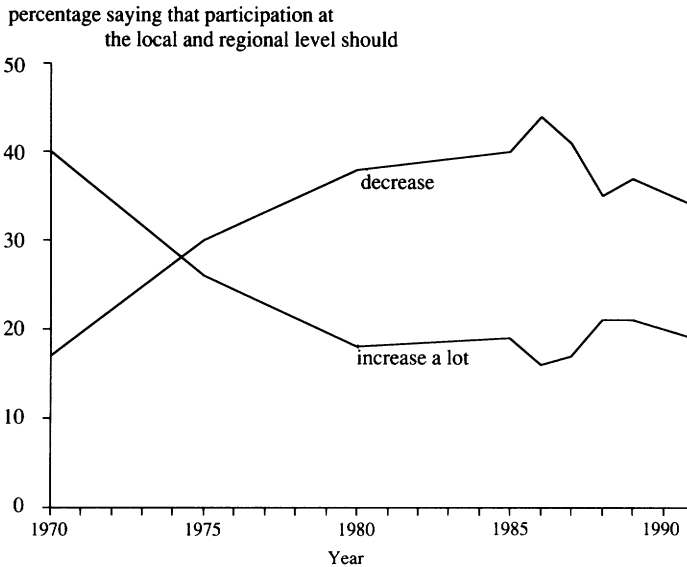
The numerous ways — through entitlement, terms and deciding agencies of participation and appeal — in which it is possible to appeal against any small aspect of projects, independently of any other aspects of such a project, result, because of the numerous phases and layers of the decision-making process, in the situation that objections, though they may have already been turned down elsewhere, come up again and again at different agencies. Although an appeal does not usually result in an adjournment, it does delay the process. (Scientific Board for Governmental Policy, 1994: 72).

**FIGURE 1**  
**Attention given to democratization by political parties**



*Note:* The European mean is calculated over all Social Democratic, Liberal and Christian Democratic parties in existence from 1945 onwards

**FIGURE 2**  
**Opinions of the Dutch population on participation**



Another trend to report here consists of the views of the Dutch population. For more than 20 years, a survey has regularly been held measuring Dutch views on public participation. One of the findings of this survey is presented in Figure 2; it reports on the percentage of respondents saying that participation at local and regional levels should increase or decrease.

Figure 2 shows that policy-makers' views on the limitation of participation are reflected in the views of the Dutch population itself, for an increasing proportion of this population is also in favour of decreasing the amount of participation at local and regional levels. It is very difficult to say reliably whether this is a cause or a consequence of views at the political level; in a traditional analysis one would see this as a cause, because the political level is held to be responsive to developments in voters' preferences. However, it could also be seen as a consequence of the way participation is managed in the policy-making process and, from this viewpoint, one could be quite sceptical about its possibilities.

The argument is, then, that public participation in The Netherlands is in decline. Nevertheless, it need not be concluded that The Netherlands is becoming an undemocratic nation-state. When we compare views in The Netherlands with dominant views in other countries, a rather different picture emerges. The following indicators are taken from the Democracy and Local Governance Project. This project (re)started in the late 1980s, and its aim was to increase knowledge about the views of local élites. The research project was designed as a cross-border study of localities and their leaders, and started work in the 1960s in 120 local communities in India, Poland, the USA and Yugoslavia. In the summer of 1990

**TABLE 1**  
**Percentage of local élites (politicians and public administrators) agreeing with statement in 1990-91**

	'Decisions should be made by experts' (%)	'Decision-making should be left in the hands of competent leaders' (%)	'Only simple questions should be considered publicly' (%)	'Participation brings undesirable conflict' (%)	'Public decisions should be made unanimously' (%)	'Leaders should modify actions to keep consensus' (%)	N
Sweden	9.0	4.6	8.8	26.2	33.0	47.1	440
Netherlands	16.8	10.2	4.3	44.6	13.9	46.0	305
Austria	31.5	13.1	29.8	67.9	22.2	47.6	378
Poland	61.5	48.4	39.6	69.1	25.5	60.4	440
Lithuania	73.6	57.3	88.0	40.8	20.9	94.2	277
Kazakhstan	75.7	75.2	49.2	59.2	94.7	91.8	448
Byelorussia	80.2	73.9	41.5	63.9	93.9	86.5	449
Slovenia	82.5	13.5	25.5	53.5	35.9	92.4	275
Russia	82.1	73.2	43.9	59.3	93.7	81.5	48
Hungary	85.1	13.9	16.3	75.3	20.4	86.1	450
Ukraine	—	—	—	—	63.6	97.8	450



the research was redesigned to examine the democratic values and practices of local leaders by comparing post-communist countries with western countries.

The empirical base of this research now covers over 700 cities and communes in 23 countries, with over 12,000 local leaders interviewed. The data are taken from national samples of localities, ranging in size from 25,000 to 250,000, nationally adjusted (Ostrowski and Teune, 1993; Teune, 1995). The responses to some of the questions posed on participation are presented in Table 1.

This table presents figures on the perception of problems associated with participation, and perceptions about technocratic decision-making — that is, decision-making in which others' interests are not taken into account and which is seen as something best left to those who know what they are talking about, such as competent leaders or experts (Strausmann, 1976; Schmandt and Katz, 1986; de Vries, 1994).

Table 1 shows that Dutch local officials are relatively positive about participation, compared to their counterparts in the other countries considered. The overwhelming majority do not prefer decisions to be made by 'experts'. Nor do they think that decisions should be made by competent leaders alone. Only the Swedish respondents have less technocratic inclinations.

They also accept that unanimity is not something that is necessary, and overall have the smallest proportion of officials who think that decisions should be modified in order to keep a consensus.

In short, participation is viewed relatively positively, because it does not result in but actually *prevents* undesirable conflict, by creating public support for decisions. However, participation should not result in alterations in the choices to be made. Government should be determined and should not have to modify its policies for different interests in order to keep a consensus. As I shall argue, the link between participation and interests has disappeared from the agenda. Nowadays, participation is only seen as appropriate in so-called 'win-win' situations. These findings are in complete agreement with the citations given earlier about the role of participation.

### **Explaining the decline of participation in the policy process**

This section gives six possible explanations for the changes that have taken place in recent years in The Netherlands. These explanations are:

- It is a 'regression towards the mean' effect.
- It is a consequence of technological developments.
- It is a consequence of economic developments.
- It is a consequence of administrative reorganization, especially decentralization, deregulation and privatization.
- It is a consequence of decreased interest in politics in general by the public.
- It is a consequence of changing political coverage by the media.

#### *Regression towards the mean*

The first explanation for the decline in public participation is that it is a regression

artefact. Since the degree of participation was so extreme in the 1970s and early 1980s and reached its climax in the antinuclear demonstrations in which over 25 percent of the Dutch population actively participated, it could thereafter only decline towards more 'normal' levels (3,750,000 signatures against the stationing of cruise missiles were handed to the prime minister in 1985; The Netherlands then had a total population of 15 million people).

Moreover, during the 1970s a wave of checks and balances were introduced into the policy-making process, which not only reflected attention for democratic procedures but also slowed down the whole process and was bound to result in a counter-reaction. These checks and balances can be categorized into a number of instruments, of which four (currently under pressure in The Netherlands) will be discussed.

The first instrument may be called the '*parafen-cultuur*' or 'initialling culture'. Every document, policy report, proposal, draft, minutes, record, proceedings and policy plan has to be signed and countersigned before it can be ratified and implemented. This applies not only to higher authorities but also to interested parties at other bureaus and departments at the same level. This instrument provides for a number of internal checks and balances. It does not bar self-orientation from the administrative system, but such behaviour is certainly balanced and checked. At the very least it means that disparate interests and the views of different interested parties with different perspectives are heard and are taken into account.

The second instrument used in The Netherlands (as well as in other countries in the West) is also aimed at providing internal checks and balances: the system of extensive *consultations* between administrators, departments and often ministries. No one decision may be made by a single actor alone. Every policy proposal has to be discussed, argued and rephrased after which it has to be discussed, argued and rephrased again. Proposals go hand in hand with provisions for commissions and special commissions, steering groups, and preliminary talks. Such consultations often take years, and the time taken for a policy to move from proposal to actual decision — for instance, on sewerage — may often take up to a decade. The crucial question is always: 'Does anyone have objections?'. Although this instrument is not unique to The Netherlands, it has strong roots in Dutch culture. Because of the absence of a majority group, the need to take the position of all minority groups (religious as well as political) into account resulted in a high value being placed on compromise. Since the late 1960s this has become known as one of the main characteristics of Dutch 'consociational democracy' (Lijphart, 1968, 1977). The adage of this approach is: 'Do not rule on the basis of majority, but rather, try to minimize the number of adversaries'. This instrument is also important from the viewpoint of neutrality, since it means that every proposal is examined from every possible angle, preventing it from being dominated by one point of view.

The third instrument is known as '*inspraak*', that is, public participation, and this ensures that before a formal decision is made, citizens can be heard and their arguments taken into account. For instance, formal procedures surrounding a

decision on a large-scale investment which may have an environmental impact are very strict. Such a decision may not be made before an environmental impact assessment has been published and approved, and all stakeholders are given an opportunity to voice their complaints, bring their objections before a court and, if necessary, appeal to a higher court. Dutch higher courts have so many cases to settle that such procedures can take years. If the procedures are not strictly followed, or if even minor procedural mistakes are made, the whole process may have to be started all over again. The system certainly ensures that no interested party is forgotten, but it will be clear that compromise and attempts to satisfy all stakeholders will not always be successful.

The fourth instrument used by the Dutch government in such cases is to install *advisory boards*. The majority of these advisory boards comprise stakeholders, private organizations and organizations in the non-profit sector. Their advice has been particularly sought in the areas of social security, education, welfare, health and social housing (Bijzondere Commissie Vraagpunten Adviesorganen, 1993: 17). Since the 1970s there has been a boom in the number of such advisory boards. In The Netherlands this development reached its apogee in 1987, with 173 permanent and 27 interim external advisory boards working on behalf of the country's 13 national departments (Bijzondere Commissie Vraagpunten Adviesorganen, 1993: 58–9). Their function is to give advice on strategic matters, long-range planning, policy development and policy implementation. Deadlines for the provision of this advice are often absent.

The first explanation for the decline of public participation, which has empirical grounds, is that in the eyes of officialdom, democracy had gone too far and the drawbacks for governmental authority, decisiveness and efficiency were too serious. Nothing could be accomplished before years had passed, and the system lacked efficiency. This argument is supported by the fact that now not only participation is waning, but also the other checks and balances which flourished in the 1970s and early 1980s. Far-reaching measures have recently been taken to reduce the number of advisory boards. The initialling culture is being replaced by short management lines and the removal of middle management. 'Flat' organizations and departments were the aim, and this was accomplished by 'downsizing' the governmental apparatus.

### *Computerization*

Second, one can point towards developments within the governmental apparatus. From the second half of the 1980s onwards, office computers, computer networks, automation and computerization penetrated the governmental apparatus as well as business. Although opinions vary about whether this development has had more than merely technical effects, it has been argued that these developments have resulted in formalization and standardization, which perfectly characterize bureaucratic policy-making in the Weberian sense. It has therefore been argued that the governmental apparatus became more bureaucratic in proportion to the degree to which computerization was implemented (Frissen, 1990). Others have

pointed out that although computerization increases the approachability of many governmental agencies — the public as ‘client’ — it reduces the degree to which government is accessible, that is, the degree to which agencies are open to the public, to their ideas or to correction — the public as ‘participant’ (Zuurmond, 1994). The argument here is that standardization and formalization are incompatible with public participation, which is soon perceived as only ever producing expensive exceptions to the rule dressed up as ‘adjustments for special needs’. Broad legislation is, of course, more easily transformed by a programmed instruction than are specific rules which draw distinctions for special circumstances, however just these latter may seem.

### *Economic developments*

Third, one can point towards economic developments. In the early 1980s The Netherlands was in a severe economic crisis. High inflation and no economic growth persuaded the government to adopt what the then prime minister called ‘no-nonsense politics’. The time for playing games was over; the sky was no longer the limit. Economic growth, employment and market-oriented policy-making became the first priority. There is, however, one problem with this explanation. In the early 1980s the zenith of the participation boom was still to come.

### *Administrative reorganization*

A fourth explanation is to be found in the administrative reorganizations which took place at the time. In the late 1980s a trend of decentralization and deregulation arose out of the idea that most decisions could be better accomplished at local level. It was claimed that this would result in tailor-made policies, flexibility and efficiency. However, not only did researchers point out that the ‘tailor-made policies’ effect was hardly ever achieved, but the establishment also ‘forgot’ to decentralize those procedures in which public participation was compulsory. Whereas routines and procedures made public participation compulsory at national level, these were lacking at local level, not to mention the privatized sectors. Participation became an instrument whose use depended on the goodwill of local officials. Some Dutch cities have seen local referenda on local policies. As soon as it became clear, however, that their outcomes could be at odds with official proposals, voices were heard that Dutch democracy could dispense with referenda, and restrictions were introduced.

A related trend is the trend towards centralization of decision-making processes towards the European level. It becomes more and more discouraging to be involved in public participation within the Member States of the European Union, since these processes become secondary to Brussels processes. The decision-making process becomes more and more a hybrid of multilevel governance in which the arrangement of public participation is one of the ‘neglected’ factors. Furthermore the actual implications of subsidiarity are not only that responsibilities and power over decision-making processes are moving towards the more

centralized, European level, but also that they are again transferred from this European level to regional levels lacking proper democratic control.

#### *Lack of political interest*

A fifth explanation for the participation decline is that the Dutch public is no longer interested in politics. However, interest in politics, especially local politics, is not actually decreasing. Not only has voting behaviour been stable — in local elections, turnout continues to lie between 70 percent and 80 percent — personal interest in politics is stable or even rising. Today, 20 percent to 30 percent of the population reads about politics in news articles, about 50 percent talk about the subject, and the number of people who say they are ‘interested’ or ‘very interested’ in politics has risen steadily from 59 percent in 1973 to 80 percent in 1989. Political non-interest cannot therefore explain the decline. What might explain it, however, is societal unrest and the need or desire for societal changes — which have been all but absent in The Netherlands (Oegema, 1993).

#### *Changes in political coverage by the media*

The sixth argument is based on research by Kleinnijenhuis and Rietberg (1996) into the development of policy theories behind the media coverage of political problems over the last two decades. Their research noted an increasing attention in the media for the opinions of supposed ‘experts’. Such experts are cited more often in the 1990s than in the 1980s and early 1970s. Over the same period, politicians and political parties are cited less and less; their opinions no longer seem to be important. The authors also show that where the causes of (for instance) economic problems were reported to actors, such as government representatives and political parties, the media couched these reports in increasingly lifeless terms. They did not report that ‘the government/the cabinet/the union should do something about a problem’, but that ‘unemployment should come down’ or ‘taxes should be lowered’ or ‘the deficit should be reduced’. In other words, the emphasis was being shifted from economic politics to macro-economics and to a financial economic outlook (Kleinnijenhuis and Rietberg, 1996; 170). The number of evaluative remarks on government, unions and employers also diminished, whereas the number of evaluative remarks about variables increased. The media have been giving voters less hold on their preference for or against political parties. Economics-centred arguments, and comments on the development of economic variables, reflect a widespread tendency to see developments as being more technical or ‘objective’ in nature, and not as being phenomena over which we have any control. Socioeconomic developments are seen as problems which policy-making and political decision-making have hardly any power to influence. Consequently, participation within the policy-making process has hardly any influence. There is hardly any talk in the media about conflicts of interest and, where such differences are apparent, they are taken care of by technocrats who know what they are doing, and who aim at an ‘objective’, ‘optimal’ solution.

The important argument in this context is that media coverage can be seen as an important explanation for the decline of participation. Because the public is informed through the media about positive or negative socioeconomic developments, of which other socioeconomic developments are presented as the cause, and the views of experts given more predominance than the views of politicians, the public will get the strong impression that public participation is redundant.

### **Cultural dynamics and the revival and decline of participation**

The previous section presented six possible explanations for the decline in public participation described at its outset, of which five seem to be valid. The question now arises as to any theoretical correspondence between these factors. In this section it is argued that a theory of cultural dynamics can cover the explanations. An interesting attempt to develop a theory of cyclical development has been presented by J. Zvi Namenwirth (1973) and Namenwirth and Weber (1987); it is interesting because he makes some remarks about governmental policy-making, tries to situate these remarks in a testable theory, and comes to remarkable conclusions and predictions on the basis of empirical research.

Namenwirth postulates that the means available to government are scarce. It therefore has to limit its attention to a certain part of the problems posed by policy- and decision-making. According to Namenwirth, this relative attention is phased. In one period government directs its attention to a certain aspect and neglects other aspects; in the next period it focuses on another aspect, namely that aspect which was neglected most in the previous period. On the basis of the Talcott Parsons classification, Namenwirth distinguishes four fundamental problems that have to be solved in a society. In Parsons' terms these are adaptation problems, goal achievement problems, integration problems and latency problems. Bales (1950) suggested, similarly, that organizations have to solve four functional problems: adaptation problems, expression problems, integration problems and instrumental problems. These problems address such questions as 'What is the responsibility of government?', 'How should society be organized in the long run?', 'How are we to achieve social and economic justice?' and 'How can we avert (for instance) economic and international threats?'. Government lacks the resources to be involved with all these problems on a continuous and simultaneous basis. It is therefore efficient to do this in phases.

Phase movement is an efficient problem-solving process . . . societies have but a finite supply of those resources necessary for adaptive problem solving. Although some resources will always be devoted to each problem, devoting more than average resources to one problem at a time is more effective and efficient than equal allocations. Irrespective of the particular phase sequence, the likelihood that a system will survive is increased by efficient and effective utilization of social, cultural and material resources. . . . Attention devoted to one problem leads to increased tension over neglected problems. Tension is reduced by shifting attention and resources to neglected problems. (Namenwirth and Weber, 1987: 113)



He defines this as the *relative attention paradigm*, in which the following assumptions are crucial.

- Collectivities such as society pursue both short-term and long-term goals.
- These goals are part of culture: they are periodically reassessed and modified.
- Culture functions as short- and long-term memory; it is the repository of accumulated learning and knowledge.
- Some knowledge and learning pertain to problems encountered in the pursuit of goals.
- Knowledge about recurring events is stored in structures of varying sizes, internal complexity and abstractness, including scripts, themes, dilemmas, precedents, ideologies, and other idea and knowledge systems.
- Collectivities have limited amounts of energy that can be devoted to problem-solving in the pursuit of goals.
- Collective attention is an active process that directs and focuses energy towards particular problems.
- Attention is generally zero-sum: attention devoted to one problem requires that less attention is devoted to other problems.
- Collective perception is not determined by the intrinsic nature of events, but rather by cultural dynamics
- Therefore, specific dilemmas or themes invoked by collectivities to interpret events reflect the state of culture rather than the state of the social or physical environment (Namenwirth and Weber, 1987: 17–18)

His research into the attention given to societal problems by political parties in the USA suggests that there are two cycles. The first long-term cycle has a length of 150 years and the second short-term cycle has a length of about 48–50 years. It is the second cycle that is especially relevant in the present article. According to Namenwirth, this second cycle is characterized by the fact that four policy aspects are given sequential priority: the responsibilities of government (the mission), long-term planning, power conflicts (democratization) and concern for economic prosperity (efficiency), after which attention for the mission (defining the responsibilities of government) goes to the top of the agenda once again. Namenwirth calls this the ‘wheel of time’ that turns continuously and results in a new dominant aspect at every fourth part. Again, according to Namenwirth, there is a strong correspondence with economic cycles, especially the Kondratieff cycle. I have successfully applied this theory in earlier articles on Dutch housing policy, especially on the use of policy instruments and the changing views on public administrators (de Vries, 1996a, b).

The theory’s assumptions determine its structure. According to Namenwirth the structure of cyclic developments can be understood as follows. The beginning of the cycle is characterized by growing attention for government authority and the mission it has to accomplish. Attention is focused on purpose and decisiveness. As the government has extensive ambitions, but most of its ideas are undeveloped and lack correspondence, this often results in ad hoc policies. Such a

period is particularly clearly seen just after a serious crisis, a major war or a national disaster. In The Netherlands this period can be pinpointed in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

The aspect neglected in this phase is that ideas have to be put into actual practice and that appropriate institutions and a long-range view are necessary to accomplish these objectives. The next period, therefore, is a reaction in which the idea of 'planning' is stressed. The aspect neglected in the previous period now gets extra attention. Such planning concerns take the form of building institutions, laws and regulations. This period can be pinpointed in The Netherlands in the late 1950s and 1960s.

Of course, the aspect of policy-making neglected in this second period is that while society shows some coherence, there is also a desire for variation. People differ, organizations differ and this diversity should be reflected in the policy-making process. This results in the third part of the cycle in which attention shifts towards taking public opinions into account. It can be seen as a reaction to the standardization inherent to planning. In this period conflicts arise about the fundamental norms and values of society. Democratization, public participation and responsiveness to a multitude of interests is emphasized (1970s and early 1980s).

The drawback of this period, however, is that one forgets that policies also have to be carried out with a measure of efficiency. There seems to be a dilemma between democratization and efficiency, and the subsequent, fourth period stresses just this point. Efficiency, internal orientation and a 'no-nonsense' mentality are the likely result, and this is indeed seen in the 1980s and early 1990s. What is now neglected, however, are the outcomes of politics, the mission and the responsibilities of government. That is the next point to be stressed; governmental authority and restructuring the mission become a central topic once again. We are currently seeing the first signs of this in The Netherlands, with evidence of cooperation, respect for government and the development of a new power doctrine. According to Namenwirth this phase will continue until the early 2000s after which a planning doctrine will again become dominant.

Seen from this perspective, the decline of public participation and the emphasis on creating support for governmental policies can be understood as existing within a larger framework. This framework involves no deliberate plot or intrigue, but is simply the outcome of shifts in attention which may actually be seen as 'compulsory' to all actors. The explanations given in the previous section (especially the 'regression towards the mean' effect), the changing media cover, the decreased attention for participation by politicians, civil servants and the public can all be seen as reflections of these cultural currents.

Computerization and economic developments can be seen as the catalysts of such processes. The economic boom of the 1960s and 1970s made a temporary neglect of efficiency possible, but this was no longer the case in the 1980s when the Dutch economy suffered severely from stagflation. Computerization could be — and was — used in the 1980s especially to make processes more efficient.



### **The management of participation in the 1990s**

The proof of the pudding is in the eating. If Namenwirth's theory has explanatory power, we should see that governmental authority, purposefulness and will are once again becoming predominant. The question this section addresses is whether indicators of this trend can be found in the thoughts on, and the management of, public participation in the Dutch policy-making process. In other words, what are the trends in the Dutch debate on public participation? They can be summarized in the following five points:

- Application of participation models, especially in win-win situations.
- Moving participation towards the beginning of the policy-making process and away from the decision-making phase.
- The goal of participation is primarily the creation of support and not the protection of interests.
- The interest conflict problem is being neglected, and restrictions are placed on participation when this problem arises. The Netherlands are moving away from a situation in which basic agreement is a prerequisite.
- The association of participation with a procedure rather than an interaction process.

When looking at the current debate about the management of participation within the policy-making process, the first point to be mentioned is that participation is today seen as an instrument to create win-win situations. Participation is defended by pointing at its possible function to create profits for all participants. The surplus value of diversity is emphasized. This is also reflected in new definitions of participation, such as: 'participation is the goal-oriented examination of possibilities to profit by an investment of manifold societal involvement' (Van Houten and Meijenfeldt, 1996: 14). The participant is seen as a partner, as a 'responsible co-producer of societal surplus' (Van Houten and Meijenfeldt, 1996) instead of as a stakeholder motivated to get his own interests on the agenda, as was the central phrase of the definitions in the 1970s (Jolles, 1974).

The most important positive association found nowadays is that participation early in the policy-making process enhances the legitimacy of the policy. It is seen as favourable to the prevention of resistance. As one local official pointed out: 'People often resist only once. When one concentrates this at the beginning of the policy-making process, then the resistance has been spent by the time the policy has to be decided upon and implemented' (A Dutch Alderman, *BMI Magazine*, 1995: 2). Participation is seen more as a means of creating support for questionable policies and persuading the diehards. 'It is an instrument which has to be utilized sparingly, with the aim of forestalling symbolic usage' (Ministry of Traffic, 1995: 13–15). This argument frequently recurs in their criteria for the 'effective' use of participation. In order to 'enhance support and avoid negative effects, especially its usage without it being absolutely necessary', the participation process must start early and must be characterized by continuity, meticulousness, honesty, respect, comprehensibility and clarity about the import and, finally, by a resolute and determined government which is prepared to limit the

use of participation (Ministry of Traffic, 1995: 16–18). It is stated that ‘in order to create societal support it is necessary to treat participation meticulously’ (p.17); ‘in order to create support it is desirable that government keep in contact with society’); and ‘the procedure should not give rise to the perception that participation is no more than a ritual formality within the policy-making process to which the government attaches no real meaning’. In other words, the fact that participation might be an empty formality is not seen as a problem, but the public’s perception that this might be the case *is*. These arguments are much more striking than the criteria. The only argument being given in favour of participation is the policy support it might create.

One major source of discontent among participants today is that participation procedures no longer represent interactions between public and policy-makers, but hearings. The process must be pictured as follows. Policy-makers put forward a proposal and the decision-makers’ preferences are already known. Participation rounds are then organized in which all stakeholders can give their comments. Of course, some do make their points. Nonetheless, the fact is that there is no debate about the issue in such participation rounds. A committee of civil servants presides over the meeting and notes the points that people raise. After everyone has had his say, the meeting is closed. Many members of the public find this very depressing. You can have your say, but nobody seems to react, and worse, nothing seems to change.

Participation has also moved away from the decision phase to the exploratory phase. This is described as the ‘co-production’ of policies. Those sharing the goal of the policy plans can participate in finding the best way of achieving this goal.

These and many other findings in The Netherlands indicate that the individual dimension of participation, that is, its instrumental use, to protect stakeholders’ interests and to try to adapt policy plans accordingly, is dwindling in favour of the collective dimension, that is, the political use of participation to enhance public support for policy-makers’ plans.

These trends fit neatly in Namenwirth’s theory, which predicted — in 1973 — that the 1990s would show an upheaval of consensus-based governmental authority and a rethink of its mission. Using participation to create policy support, directing participation towards win–win situations, removing participation from the political decision-making phase, and, in particular, neglecting the function of participation as a way of debating conflicting interests are all indications that governmental authority, decisiveness and will are once again becoming dominant issues.

## Conclusions

In this article I have described the declining attention for public participation in The Netherlands and have tried to explain this development. Six proposed explanatory factors were given: a ‘regression towards the mean’ effect, technological and economic developments, administrative reorganization (especially decentralization, deregulation, privatization and centralization towards the

European level), decreased public interest in politics in general, and changing political cover in the media. Apart from a decreased interest in politics of the general public, all these factors seem valid. These factors can be contained within a cultural context and, in this sense, Namenwirth's theory of cultural dynamics is especially interesting. In this theory, the decline of participation is seen as a reaction to a previous period in which there was an upheaval of participation, while efficiency and governmental authority were neglected (the 1970s). The reaction to this period in the 1980s, in which the need for more efficiency was particularly stressed, and the need for decisiveness which has been emphasized in the 1990s, can be clearly traced in the participation debate. This has implications for the management of these interests. Nowadays, participation is managed in a manner that removes participation from the decision-making stage and moves it to the beginning of the policy process. Other trends are to restrict participation to win-win situations, to allow participation as an interactive process only to those participants who share the government's basic values and goals, and to make participation in other instances no more than a procedural matter. Of course, these developments enhance the speed and efficiency of policy-making, but we should always ask at what cost they are accomplished. There is no denying that the dilemmas and conflicts of interest that existed 20 years ago, for instance with regard to infrastructure improvement and the protection of the environment, continue to exist. That these dilemmas hardly impinge on today's policy-making processes is not only indicative of clever political management but also of the neglect of certain aspects of policy-making, especially the resolution of conflicts of interest. The cultural theory presented earlier predicts that when such aspects are neglected too long, a reaction will arise.

In a previous article I termed this the Cinderella effect.

Participation can be arranged perfectly, but it is effectively a pretence unless it is followed up at the decision-making phase. If it is not, participation has no more than the outward appearance of reality, like Cinderella's beautiful dress. For an evening she was allowed to partake at the feast, but one can only be queen of the ball once, and for this Cinderella it is long past midnight. Just as participation and democracy are two sides of the same coin, Cinderella's foot fits her shoe. She is still waiting for her prince; having approached all the other girls in the kingdom, however, he discovers that the shoe sticks to everybody but Cinderella. (van den Heuvel and de Vries, 1995: 126–7)

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